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Peaceful Ecuador sees rise of terror in Marxist AVC

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QUITO, Ecuador — This is a small republic, about the size of Colorado with roughly three times the population, on the west coast of South America at the equator, for which it is named. It escaped the clutches of military rule six years ago and is governed by an elected government that is determined to make free enterprise work — with or without the help of the United States.

Its president, Leon Febres Cordero, is a businessman-politician. He is a baseball-loving, pro-American leader who likes hot dogs — he once ordered them at New York City's posh Pierre Hotel — and is absolutely determined to get along with the international financial community, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is the *bête noire* of most Latin American politicians, in order to do what he wants.

What he wants is money so the economy can free itself of balance-of-payments constraints and take off to sustained growth rates that he hopes will guarantee a free-market strategy will survive his term of office.

President Febres may well succeed, but Ecuador is not without

problems. One of them has drawn little international attention as far as Ecuador is concerned, and even here, it remains a nearly invisible issue. That issue is terrorism.

Ecuador has much less terrorism than its two immediate neighbors, Colombia and Peru, but the threat is real and growing. The country has several terrorist groups. The largest and best organized is Alfaro Vive Carajo — known here as AVC.

Although the government is playing down the threat for the moment, it is known that President Febres Cordero is concerned.

The AVC is Marxist, but has no known ties with Ecuador's orthodox, pro-Soviet Communist Party.

In the past, it has been labeled Maoist, and then pro-Albanian — hence AVC's nickname here "los Albanistas," for the Albanians who

are said to have helped finance its activities. What that communist state on the Adriatic might have had in mind is anyone's guess.

Over the years, the AVC has become well-organized, tightly-disciplined and unpenetrated by the police. It is said to have a clear and precise plan of insurgency, and to be following its timetable scrupulously.

AVC's major effort is directed at Quito, the capital; its rural arm is far less active.

Ecuador's terrorists' actions so far have been largely limited to bank robberies to fund their operations, and the takeover of television stations to publicize themselves.

At times, AVC demonstrates that it is still in the learning stage. A few months ago, an AVC bomb factory blew up in a Quito residential neighborhood, killing several of the terrorists.

But the group is increasingly capable of bold and effective action. Last March, the terrorist raided a police armory and captured a substantial stockpile of arms and ammunition.

Recently, AVC members scrawled revolutionary slogans on the walls of the Liberal Party center in full view

of the guards assigned to protect the U.S. Agency for International Development mission next door. Wisely, the outnumbered and outgunned security force did nothing but watch.

So far, the AVC has used a minimum of violence — although it killed several policemen in a Guayaquil shootout recently. Observers here believe the AVC is still in the "Robin Hood stage" of its insurrection, in which the attempt to attract popular support is paramount.

But there is growing evidence that the AVC is planning the second stage right now. That they are capable of careful planning has already been proved by a daring jailbreak of AVC leaders involving the construction of a sophisticated tunnel.

Phase two, which some intelligence sources say is imminent, is expected to involve kidnappings and

political assassinations. Americans may be among the targets.

How well-connected is the AVC to international terrorism? The evidence is sketchy.

President Febres Cordero, for one, believes the group is linked with drug traffickers. The U.S. government is not yet sure. But AVC ties with Colombia's guerrilla organization, M-19, are suspected in some circles.

Recently, evidence turned up linking AVC with the Sandinistas of Nicaragua and with Libya. That evidence came to light after the Ecuadorian police captured Rosa Cardenas, one of five top leaders of the movement, last year. Unfortunately for Miss Cardenas, she was caught carrying documents proving the AVC was soliciting funds from Managua and Tripoli.

Nicaragua and Libya responded tentatively in the affirmative — provided the AVC prove itself an effective outfit. Apparently, even within the terrorist network, money is limited and scarce resources must be allocated for relatively sure things.

The lure of cash is likely to push the AVC soon to the next stage of the revolution — and that means a lot more shooting.

It is strongly suspected here that the AVC already has cadres in El Salvador and Nicaragua, which would mean that Ecuadorian terrorists are getting on-the-job training in guerrilla warfare.

Ecuador is clearly not prepared for an onslaught of terrorism. Moreover, the government is anxious to attract foreign investment, and therefore is not anxious to talk much in public about the problem.

Yet it is there, festering, and both the army and the police have no experience in this form of warfare, in contrast to Ecuador's neighbors, Colombia and Peru, which have battled guerrillas and terrorists since the 1960s.

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The police are undermanned, poorly trained, and have little intelligence capability — critical factors in combatting terrorism. Furthermore, they are handicapped, like the other police forces in the hemisphere, by Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which forbids U.S. assistance to Latin America's police.

The army, well-educated and professional, is still geared to fight a conventional war — namely, against Peru, with which Ecuador has long disputed their Amazon Valley boundary.

Instead of helicopters, Quito's military men still covet Mirage fighters to match Lima's modern air force.

U.S. officials are trying to re-focus Ecuador's efforts at internal security — with some success, judging from remarks by the foreign minister to The Washington Times last week.